

VAN GOGH

Continued from E1

Crows" (1890), the year of van Gogh's death.

The exhibit also includes such famous works as "Self Portrait as an Artist," "The Bedroom" and "The Harvest" (all three from 1888).

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born March 30, 1853 in Zundert, Holland. From early childhood onward, he was withdrawn and introverted, with a marked preference for solitude. Van Gogh was very close to his younger brother, Theo, and their relationship was the central one of their lives.

A voracious reader, van Gogh was fond of poetry, works of theology (his father was a Dutch Reformed Protestant minister) and the novels of Charles Dickens. He was adept at languages, spoke German and became fluent in both written and spoken French and English, in addition to his native Dutch.

Van Gogh was first introduced to art when, at 16, he took a job at The Hague gallery — one of the most prestigious in Europe — where his uncle was a partner. When the company moved him to Paris, van Gogh lost interest in becoming an art dealer and was fired for taking a vacation at Christmas without informing his superiors.

Not having a high regard for food, he would avoid what he called "luxuries," like gravy, butter and meat. Instead, van Gogh would dine on bread, cheese and many cups of strong black coffee. He suffered from gum disease and once had 10 teeth pulled at a single session.

At this point in his life, van Gogh immersed himself in religion, threw out his modern, worldly books and became "daffy with piety," according to his sister Elisabeth. Although disturbed by his fanaticism and odd behavior, his parents agreed to pay for the private lessons he would need to gain a place at the university, so he could follow in the ministerial footsteps of his father.

Failing badly, van Gogh tried a brief stint at training as an evangelist. He preached in the mining regions of south Belgium, responding to the desperate poverty of the inhabitants by wearing clothes made from sacks, not washing and giving away what few possessions he had. When his ministerial appointment was not renewed, his father despaired, believing his son to be a social misfit.

At age 27, lonely and at his wits' end, van Gogh resolved to become an artist. His earlier desire to help his fellow men as an evangelist gradually developed into an urge to leave mankind some memento



Van Gogh's "Almond Blossom" (oil on canvas, 1890) shows the influence Japanese prints had on the artist.

Van Gogh and the Japanese prints

Running concurrently with LACMA's exhibition "Van Gogh's Van Goghs: Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam" will be a showcase of 25 Japanese prints that influenced van Gogh's paintings. This exhibit also runs through May 16 and will be in the museum's Pavilion for Japanese Art.

in the form of drawings or paintings.

Initially, van Gogh lived at his parents' home where he set himself to the task of learning how to draw. At the end of 1881, he moved to The Hague to continue studying drawing. Back at his parents' house in 1883, he began regularly painting scenes of peasant life, patterned on the works of French artist Jean-Francois Millet.

In 1886, van Gogh went to live with his brother Theo in Paris. There, he was confronted with the modern art of the impressionists and post-impressionists. Deciding the dark palette he developed back in Holland was hopelessly out-of-date, he lightened his palette and adopted, albeit briefly, the brushstrokes typical of Impressionist works. Unable to afford models, van Gogh often painted his own portrait.

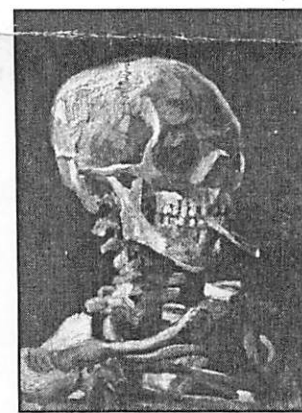
In Paris he met and became friendly with the artists Camille Pissarro, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin. However, among other artists he was notably unpopular; a number of them mocked his work and mercilessly

ridiculed his dress and appearance.

Van Gogh sometimes put candles on the brim of his hat in order to see the canvas while painting a night scene. He was also known to work with great speed. One painting, "Garden in Auvers," took him only 45 minutes to complete.

But his scenes of Paris are among his freshest and happiest paintings, illustrating the exhilaration he felt for his new environment. Here, van Gogh created many brightly colored still lifes of flowers and books. He had a habit of painting a duplicate, or another version of a painting he was particularly pleased with. He also didn't keep a reliable inventory of his finished work, stored completed paintings in a number of locations and often traded paintings for food and materials. Some, he gave away as gifts.

By 1888, van Gogh grew impatient and exhausted with Paris life



"Skull of a skeleton with a burning cigarette" (oil on canvas, 1885) shows the artist's humor.

and moved to Arles, in the south of France. There, he befriended simple people as he had done back in Holland. It was here van Gogh painted the famous "The Zouave" and "Bedroom," a symbol of simplicity and peacefulness.

Toward the end of the year his optimism was rudely shattered by the first signs of an illness, a type of epilepsy that took the form of delusions and psychotic episodes. Van Gogh himself described the episodes as "melancholy." Not only did his seizures cause the loss of his friendship with Gauguin, it was during this time that the artist cut off his left earlobe.

In April of 1889 van Gogh admitted himself for a period of time to the nearby Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum as a voluntary patient. While healing from his mental illness, he continued to paint, creating several works that would later be considered some of his best.

Although he now had a small but growing circle of admirers, van Gogh lost his original passion for art. "I feel — a failure," he wrote to Theo. "That's it as far as I'm concerned — I feel that this is the destiny that I accept, that will never change."

On July 27, 1890, at age 37, van Gogh shot himself in the chest. He died two days later, at 1:30 a.m., in his brother Theo's arms. Van Gogh's last words were either, "I wish I could die like this," or, "I wish I could die now," depending upon the source.

From the beginning of his career, van Gogh sent most of his works to Theo in exchange for the latter's moral and financial help. But with his brother's suicide, Theo's life was thrown into disarray. Confused and emotional, he resolved to establish his brother's reputation as a great artist. Unfortunately, however, he never had the chance.

His physical and mental health always fragile, Theo suffered a mental breakdown in September. He was taken back to Holland but died shortly thereafter, a mere six months after his brother.

Theo's widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, returned to Holland with the collection and dedicated herself to getting her brother-in-law the recognition he deserved. In 1914, with his fame assured, she published the correspondence between the two brothers. From that moment on, van Gogh's oeuvre became inextricably interwoven with the story of his remarkable and tragic life.

On May 15, 1990, almost exactly 100 years from the day it was painted, "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" sold at auction for \$82.5 million, the highest price ever paid for a single work of art.

VINCENT

Continued from E1

juxtaposing of lean lines and fierce swaths of paint — what I call the "wisp" and the "whap" — breathes energy into every painting on display.

LACMA's presentation of the paintings couldn't be better. A new system of lighting, designed to sim-

ulate the natural daylight conditions under which van Gogh painted, allows viewers to see the paintings more in the way van Gogh saw them himself.

Because these "paintings will not travel like this again in our lifetime," says John Leighton, director of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, people must get advance tickets to "Van Gogh's Van Gogh: Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam," by

calling Ticketmaster at 213-462-ARTS (2787).

Tickets will also be available at the LACMA box office. Tickets for the exhibition are time and date stamped, and ticket holders will only be allowed into the exhibition at the time indicated on the ticket. The exhibit will be open seven days a week, from 9 a.m.-9 p.m.

Ticket prices for adults are \$17.50 for weekdays and \$20 for weekends; senior (62 and over) \$10

for weekdays and \$15 for weekends; child (6-17) \$5 for weekdays and weekends. Children under 5 are free at all times. Groups of 20-49 are \$15 a piece on weekdays and \$17 on weekends; Groups over 50 are \$12.50 a piece for weekdays and \$15 on weekends.

For more information call the LACMA at 323-857-6000 or visit their Web site at <http://www.lacma.org>.

4 van Gogh paintings made it to S.L. — in '41

Dave Gagon

Deseret News visual arts writer

Another once-in-a-lifetime van Gogh experience happened right here in Salt Lake City, back in 1941. Fourteen original paintings by the Dutchman were exhibited at the Salt Lake Art Center, then known as the "Art Barn." It was the only public gallery in town, located in Reservoir Park. In his book "Andy Warhol Slept Here," Will South, research curator at the Utah Museum of Fine Art, recounts how the center's small, wooden building had but one main room for the exhibition pictures — and there was no alarm system and no guard. "In fact, there were no employees — the exhibitions were organized and installed on a volunteer basis." The exhibition came about because the government of the Netherlands had loaned a large number

of van Goghs to an exposition in San Francisco in 1939-40. When Hitler invaded Holland, it made returning the paintings impossible, so it was decided that the original show should be split up into smaller exhibits and travel around the United States and Canada until the war was over.

"Women of the Junior League of Salt Lake City applied for one of the shows, and their request was approved," writes South. "The show no doubt inspired young artists in attendance, such as the now nationally recognized V. Douglas Snow, who was just 13 when he saw van Gogh's 'Wheatfield with Skylark, Reaper,' and 'Self-Portrait,' at the Art Center."

Of course, today, Salt Lake City could never afford the insurance guarantees required to bring original van Goghs to Utah for an exhibition.

But it did happen once.

Vincent van Gogh's chronology



1853

March 30: Birth of Vincent Willem van Gogh in Zundert, Netherlands, the eldest son of a Dutch Reformed minister.

1857

Birth of van Gogh's brother, Theo.

1869

Begins working at The Hague gallery of the French art dealers Goupil & Cie.

1872

First letters to Theo. Van Gogh still writes about 700 before his death.

1873

Transferred to London branch of Goupil. First visit to Paris.

1875

Transferred to Paris.

1876

Dismissed by gallery. Becomes a teacher, then an assistant preacher in England.

1877

Moves to Amsterdam to study theology.

1878

Gives up his studies. Moves to the Borinage coal-mining region in south Belgium to do evangelical work.

1880

Decides to become an artist. Studies at Brussels Academy. Theo begins helping him financially.

1881

Moves to live with parents. In late November moves to The Hague to study with Anton Mauve.

1882

Liaison with prostitute Sien Hoornik. First oil painting.

1883

Breaks off with Hoornik and moves back in with parents.

1885

Death of his father. Enrolls for a few months at the academy of Antwerp.

1886

Moves to Paris where he lives with Theo.

Meets Toulouse-Lautrec and Gauguin.

1887

Organizes an exhibition of Japanese woodcuts. Meets Seurat.

1888

In February, moves to Arles, in Provence.

In October, Gauguin visits him.

During a mental breakdown cuts off his left earlobe.

His paintings are included in the Salon des Independants, Paris.

1889

Enters the asylum of Saint-Remy as a voluntary patient.

1890

In January, sells first picture. First article devoted to his work is enthusiastic.

In May, moves to Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris.

July 27: Shoots himself in the chest, dies two days later.

1891

Death of Theo.

1892

First retrospective exhibition in the Netherlands.

1893

First publication of van Gogh's letters.

1910

First biography, by Julius Meier-Graefe.



1913

Margaret E. Irwin's "How Many Miles to Babylon?" is the first novel inspired by van Gogh's life.

1935

First van Gogh exhibit in America, at the Museum of Modern Art.

1937

Irving Stone's "Lust for Life: The Novel of Vincent van Gogh" is a bestseller.

1956

"Lust for Life" is first movie about van Gogh, starring Kirk Douglas, based on Stone's novel.

1973

Opening of van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

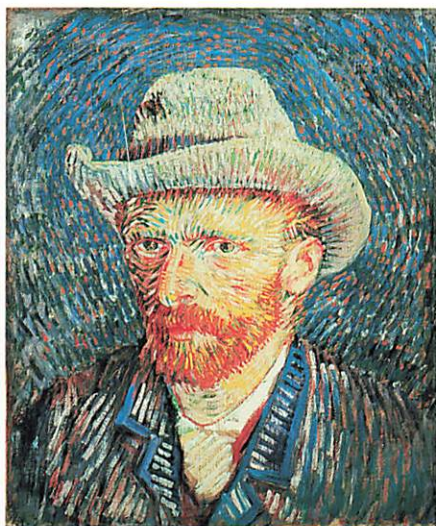




VINCENT VAN GOGH

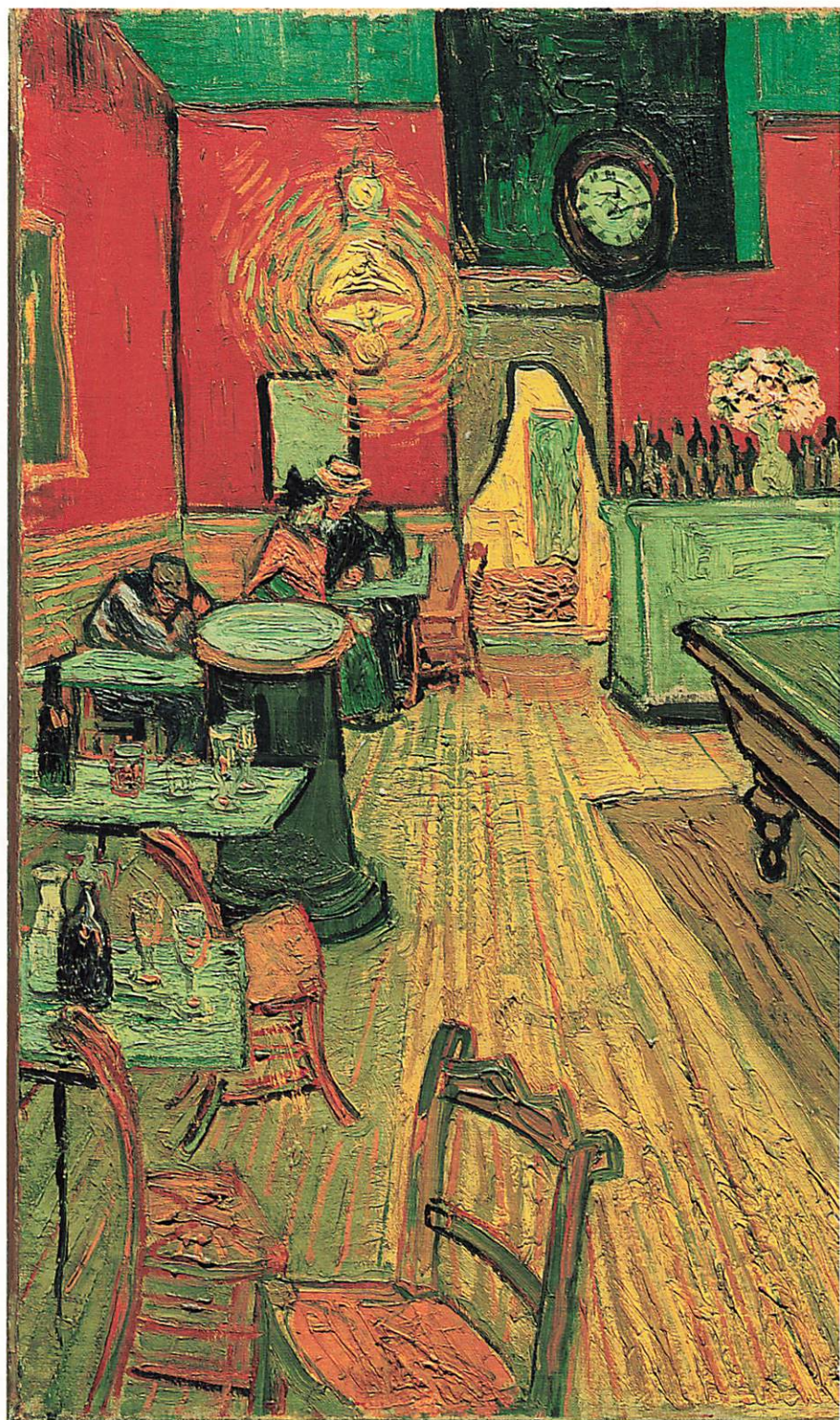


LULLABY IN COLOR

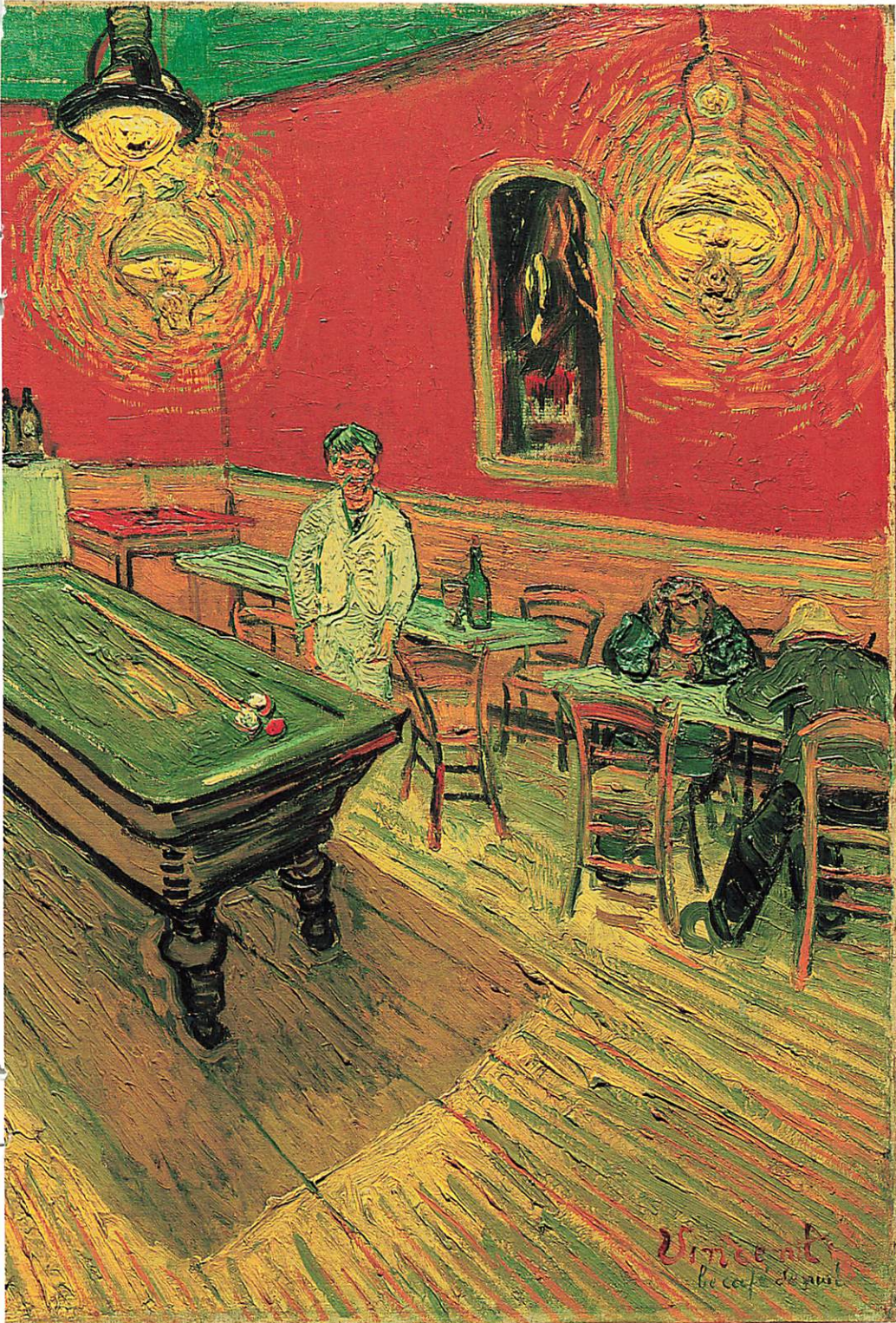


VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

"Sorrowful yet always rejoicing," Vincent van Gogh, who grew up walking the Dutch countryside, traveled through life seeking the eternal "Light that rises in the darkness"—like these swans readying for flight south of Amsterdam. From the pain and beauty of his journey, he created masterworks of passion, including penetrating self-portraits, such as this one at age 34. Van Gogh likened painting to performing music. "Whether I really sang a lullaby in colors," he wrote, "I leave to the critics."



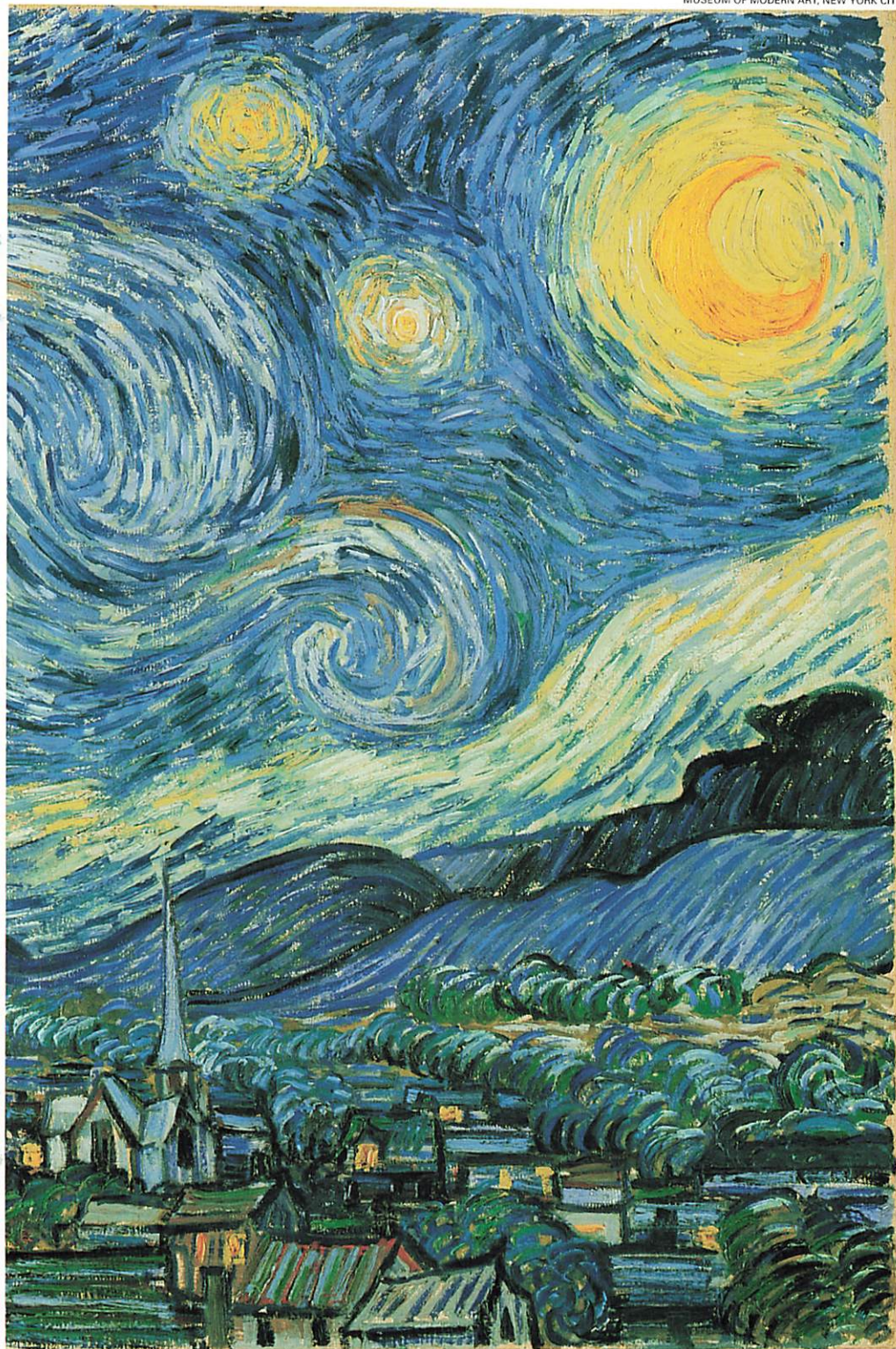
Greens and yellows bathe an all-night café van Gogh painted to express “the powers of darkness in a low public house . . . where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime.” Four months later, at the height of his talent, he sliced off an earlobe and collapsed into nightmares and hallucinations.



THE NIGHT CAFÉ, SEPTEMBER 1888



Looking through his barred asylum window, van Gogh saw a vast night sky, which his imagination transformed with swirls of color and stars of “exaggerated brilliance.” In such views the artist glimpsed something “one can only call God . . . eternity in its place above this world.”



THE STARRY NIGHT, JUNE 1889

By JOEL L. SWERDLOW

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Photographs by LYNN JOHNSON

THE LETTERS FROM VINCENT VAN GOGH to his brother Theo are yellowed. Some are torn at the corners or have holes from aging. Acid from ink eats through the cheap paper.

I have come to this bombproof vault in the cellar of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam to begin my search for Vincent. Who was this man who said he “sang a lullaby in colors,” and why does he have such a hold on us? His paintings sell for the most money; his exhibitions attract the highest number of visitors; reproductions of his work—on socks, sheets, party napkins, coffee cups—permeate homes and offices; the song “Vincent” has sold more than ten million copies since 1971; movies mythologize his life. No other artist, at any time in any culture, has been more popular.

THE 650 LETTERS from Vincent to Theo fill three volumes. Their first surprise is immediate: I knew that Theo financed Vincent’s painting and had assumed Theo was the big brother. But Vincent was older. The letters begin in 1872, when Vincent was 19 and Theo was 15.

Vincent was working in The Hague. His uncle had got him a job with Europe’s top art dealership. The family had decided that Theo too would become an art dealer. Vincent wrote Theo a letter of congratulations. *I am so glad that we shall both be in the same profession.** Big brother Vincent began to offer advice. *Keep your love of nature, for that is the true way to learn to understand art more and more.*

Before I began reading, I had a clear image of van Gogh: Untutored genius. Bohemian. Poor. Forsaken in love. Lonely. Sold only one painting. Crazy. Committed suicide. But the voice in Vincent’s letters is insightful and literate. *How beautiful Shakespeare is! Who is mysterious like him? His language and style can indeed be compared to an artist’s brush, quivering with fever and emotion. But one must learn to read, just as one must learn to see and learn to live.*

Despite obvious intelligence, Vincent kept

failing. After the art dealership fired him because he argued too much, he taught Bible in England, worked as a clerk in Dordrecht, a small town in southern Holland, and then moved to Amsterdam to study for the ministry. He wrote to Theo that the solution to his troubles lay in God. *There is a God Who knows what we want better than we do ourselves, and Who helps us whenever we are in need.*

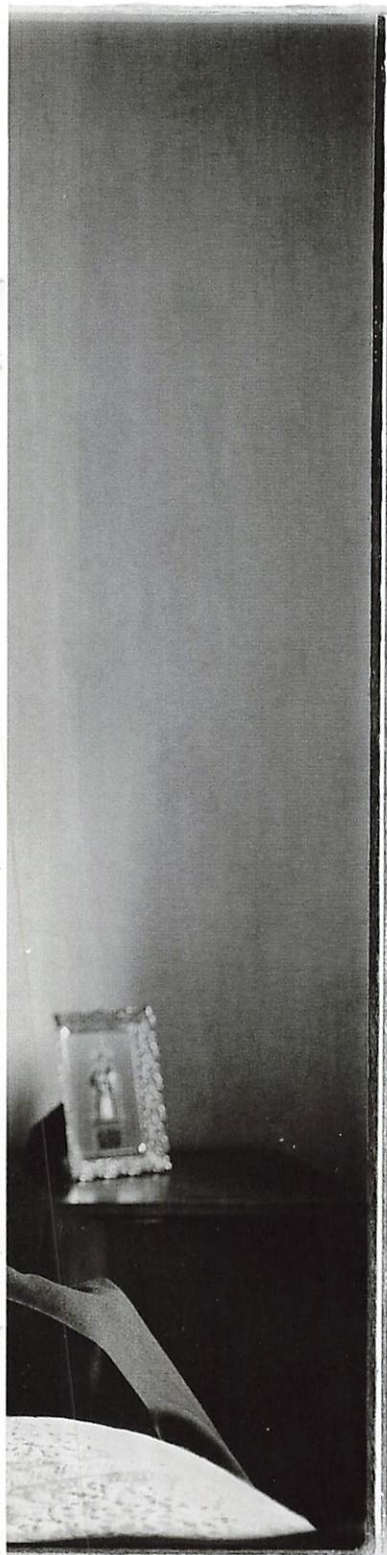
In Amsterdam the 24-year-old Vincent was so depressed he thought he might die. Walking through the city made him happy, Vincent reported to Theo in letters, but the depression continued. *My head is sometimes heavy, and often it burns and my thoughts are confused.*

I meet Peter Hanneman, director of the Psychiatric Crisis Center in Amsterdam, who specializes in treating troubled young adults, and describe Vincent’s symptoms: Argumentative. Obsessive. Often anxious. *My stomach has become terribly weak.* Eats mostly bread and coffee. Trouble sleeping. Denies himself pleasure. Heavy smoker.

“Most helpful for such a person would be to help him find the part of himself he does not ordinarily use,” Dr. Hanneman says. “It would take time. But there is a genius in everybody. If he finds it, his so-called problems can disappear or seem less important.”

I explain to Hanneman that as a child and

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KRÖLLER-MÜLLER MUSEUM, OTTERLO, THE NETHERLANDS



THE BEARERS OF THE BURDEN, EARLY 1881

BORINAGE Back broken by a coal tunnel cave-in 45 years ago, Giovanni Russo (left) rests in his bedroom in the Borinage region of Belgium. He fingers a photograph of his wife, who prayed to St. Anthony to bring him home safely from the mines. After abandoning religious studies, van Gogh moved to this bleak area on the French border to work as an evangelist among the poor, giving away most of his clothes and spending his nights nursing miners burned in underground explosions. His neighbors called him mad or a saint. His church superiors dismissed him for lack of eloquence. At 26, jobless, he decided to become an artist, copying drawings and prints. In one of his early works (above), women bend under sacks of coal as they pass a shrine containing a crucifix. Van Gogh believed the miners' labor and lowly status brought them close to Christ, who bore the sins of a world that despised him. Van Gogh saw his work as an artist in a similar light. "I consciously choose the dog's path through life," he wrote to Theo. "I shall be poor; I shall be a painter; I want to remain human."



THE HAGUE *Echo of the woman van Gogh hoped to marry, a prostitute poses in Amsterdam's red-light district. Having moved to The Hague for the company of artists, van Gogh found companionship of a different sort—with an unwed mother named Sien (drawing at right), who sometimes walked the streets. "I have a feeling of being at home when I am with her, as though she gives me my own hearth," he wrote of their life together in his apartment. But with money tight and both families hostile, he left the city, alone.*

VAN GOGH MUSEUM



WOMAN WITH A CHILD ON HER LAP, 1883



THE POTATO EATERS, MAY 1885



HEAD OF A PEASANT WOMAN WITH CAP, 1885

NUENEN Their skin “the color of a very dusty potato,” peasants gather for an evening meal in van Gogh’s first major painting, set in a hut near his parents’ house in rural Nuenen. “I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish,” he wrote. “It speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food.” To prepare, van Gogh spent the winter drawing peasant hands and heads, such as the one at left, in a series modeled after black-and-white magazine illustrations depicting the toil and misery of ordinary people. On the final canvas he exaggerated the coarseness of the peasants’ features and the darkness of the hut, applying paint like worked earth. “If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam—all right, that’s not unhealthy.”



WOMAN AT A TABLE IN THE CAFÉ DU TAMBOURIN, 1887

young adult Vincent had loved to draw. His work showed talent. Yet no one encouraged him to become an artist. His father, a small-town minister, thought he should be a salesclerk. Theo, who knew Vincent best, thought he should be a bookkeeper or a carpenter's apprentice. "What if someone had directed Vincent toward art?" I ask. "What if he had been spared the ten years of confusion and failure? Could that have helped?"

"Self-discoveries must emerge at their own pace," Hanneman says. "Van Gogh had to discover himself when he was ready."

Van Gogh abandoned his ministry studies. He then went as an evangelist to the Borinage, a coal-mining region that spans the Belgian-French border—where he nursed injured miners and gave away the money Theo had started sending him. In the Borinage, as throughout his life, reading helped shape how he viewed the world. Vincent compared the miners to the slaves in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *There is still so much slavery in the world.*

The last mine in the Borinage closed in the 1960s. To find miners, I stop at a hospital. One 76-year-old has a strong handshake. He began to work underground at age 14. "One lung is broken, and the other does not work well," he explains. He describes gas explosions, suffocations, accidents, the daily descent. His neighbor in the next bed, a retired baker, listens. "They were slaves," he says, interrupting. Vincent's exact words.

While in the Borinage, van Gogh discovered himself just as Dr. Hanneman described. In March 1880, just before his 27th birthday, he walked from the French border city of Valenciennes to Courrières—about 30 miles. His goal: to visit the studio of Jules Breton, one of Europe's leading painters. He had little to show Breton, only pen and charcoal drawings.

Van Gogh stood outside Breton's studio, too scared to enter. He wandered into the town's church, admired a copy of Titian's painting "Burial of Christ," and walked the 50 miles back to his home in Cuesmes, Belgium. *Three days and three nights in the beginning of March, in wind and rain, without a roof over*

my head. During this journey van Gogh realized he was a painter. He never explained to anyone why or how this happened. *From that moment everything has seemed transformed for me.*

I retrace his journey, imagining him wet and penniless, getting bread by trading drawings—none of which has ever surfaced. The countryside is much as he saw it. But most of the church and many of the houses in Courrières are made of new bricks. "Allied soldiers were in the church during World War II," an elderly woman explains as she guides me through the church. "They refused to surrender, so the Germans burned down the church and the town. Several hundred people died." Some walls of the church still have bullet holes.

Perhaps sensing my disappointment, my guide says, "My aunt had six sunflowers that van Gogh did here. She lost them during World War II."

Van Gogh did not paint sunflowers until seven years after Courrières, so her story could not be true. But I appreciate her desire to be part of van Gogh and do not correct her.

VINCENT KEPT MOVING—Holland, Brussels, Antwerp. As I follow him, his letters read like a play with two major characters. One is offstage because Vincent rarely saved Theo's letters.

Many nights I stay awake, unable to stop reading. The letters open a window on the soul, sometimes so intense, so personal, I look away from the page. *My youth is gone—not my love of life or my energy, but I mean the time when one feels so lighthearted and carefree.* Vincent is becoming my friend. Knowing how his letters will end, I read slowly. When I fall asleep, I force myself awake and continue reading.

Wherever Vincent lived, he studied art. In Antwerp one teacher called his work "putrefied dogs." But Vincent developed according to classical academic training: drawing, charcoal, anatomy, wood engravings, perspective, composition, tone, and color. He could produce realistic sketches, but he failed classes because he refused to follow instructions.

More of my preconceptions about van Gogh begin to fall away. Bohemian café life? No. He had a strict regime. Up at 4 a.m. to work. Poor? Yes, but by choice. He received 150 francs from Theo every month, more than double what a laborer made. Most went for

LYNN JOHNSON used special-format black-and-white photography for this story because she wanted, through light and composition, to evoke the feeling of van Gogh's time. "How fearful it made me," she says, "to be on a page with the work of van Gogh."

paint, tobacco, and models. Sold only one painting? Before producing great works, he sold drawings and traded his work for supplies. Lonely? True. *There may be a great fire in our soul, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see only a wisp of smoke.*

His behavior was self-destructive. He would admire a woman from a distance, then announce his love, scaring her away. During 1882 and 1883 he lived with a prostitute and her two children, demanding that Theo support them. This contributed to a near break in the brothers' relationship. For about two weeks Theo stopped answering Vincent's letters.

THEO MOVED from Holland to Paris in 1880, eventually becoming a branch manager for a leading gallery. He lived in Paris the rest of his life. I skim ahead, looking for references to him. Shy. Black eyeglasses. Fastidious dresser. Saves Vincent's letters in a desk drawer. Ill health: sciatic pain, persistent cough, seizures, weeks of inability to think clearly. Vincent was worried. *I am very sorry to hear that you don't feel well either.*

Theo never threatened to stop sending money and, in effect, bought all work that Vincent did not trade or give away. When Theo complained that business was bad, Vincent told him to borrow money and send it. Vincent was also skilled at manipulating Theo's emotions. *I am sorry that I didn't fall ill and die in the Borinage that time, instead of taking up painting, for I am only a burden to you.*

Vincent paid models before buying food and often had nothing to eat until Theo's next letter. Living on bread and coffee for days as Vincent did leaves me light-headed and preoccupied with food. To earn a meal, why didn't Vincent work as a laborer? He was broad shouldered and strong. The letters make his answer clear: Painting was more important than food.

Vincent's financial dependency was complete. *My underwear is also beginning to fall apart.* Nonetheless, he remained the big brother, eager to instruct Theo. *The best way to know God is to love many things. Love a friend, a wife. . . . But one must love with a lofty and serious intimate sympathy.*

Although he wanted to show the dignity of daily survival, Vincent's subject matter remained downbeat. He sought unattractive

models and unpleasant scenes. *I see drawings and pictures in the poorest huts, in the dirtiest corner.* His work so far, to me, is unappealing. Why be reminded about life's ugliness? Yet Vincent believed that people would want to look at his drawings. *No result of my work could please me better than that ordinary working people would hang such prints in their room or workshop.*

IN SEPTEMBER 1883, when Vincent was 30 years old and had been an artist for three years, he discovered color. *I have felt a certain power of color awakening in me.* This awakening came roughly at the point at which most new artists turn to color. Van Gogh's actions, however, were extreme. Color soon dominated all his perceptions. Vincent began piano lessons, telling the teacher that musical notes range from dark blue to yellow. He thought Vincent was crazy and refused to continue the lessons.

Van Gogh's courtship of color, his one successful love affair, was not the mad dabbling portrayed in *Lust for Life*, the 1934 best-seller made into a 1956 Academy Award-winning movie. He developed a rigorous system, based on the "laws of simultaneous contrast and complementary colors" described by Michel-Eugène Chevreul, a 19th-century French chemist. *The laws of the colors are unutterably beautiful.* At times, he stepped back and stared at a canvas for two hours before selecting his next stroke. *If one combines two of the primary colors, for instance yellow and red, in order to produce a secondary color—orange—this secondary color will attain maximum brilliancy when it is put close to the third primary color not used in the mixture.*

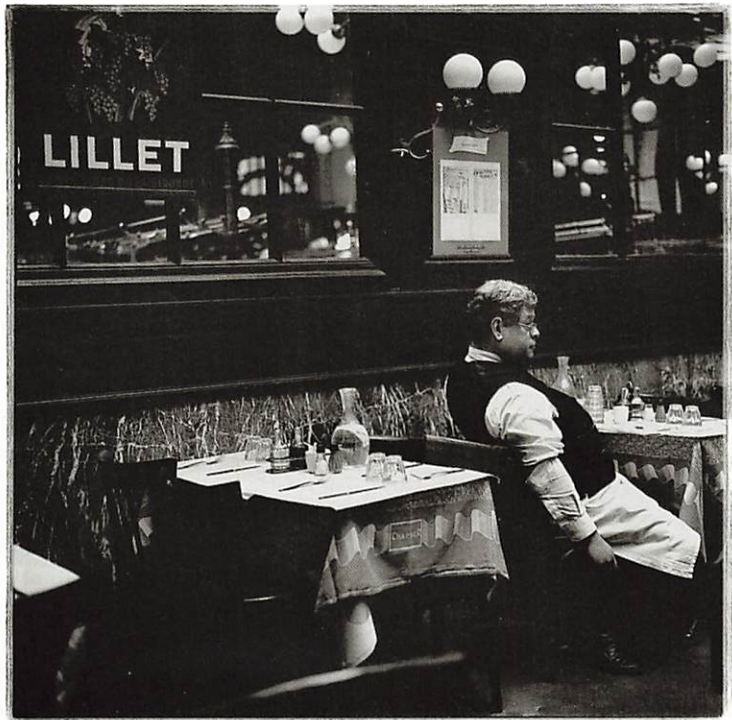
Vincent's mastery of color grew in late 1883 and 1884. On a warm summer day I follow Vincent's footsteps from Nieuw-Amsterdam to Zweeklo, in the part of the Netherlands that has changed least since his time. Cars stop to offer me a ride. They cannot understand why I want to walk. Only by going slowly, as Vincent suggests, can you see. I look inside a white potato blossom and find soft shades of purple and yellow.

Van Gogh did not notice—or care to paint—such colors. Instead, he focused on his traditional subject: ordinary people. In early 1885, encouraged by Theo's willingness to try selling his paintings, he completed "The Potato



SUNFLOWERS, LATE SUMMER 1887

PARIS Under the Impressionists' influence van Gogh abandoned a dark palette, rendering still lifes (above) in "intense color and not a gray harmony." He showed his work for the first time in the Café du Tambourin (left). Joining the avant-garde, he hung his canvases with theirs in working-class restaurants like the one below. A friend wrote that the exhibition was "more modern than anything that was made in Paris at that moment."



Eaters.” It is his first work of genius because of his successful color experimentation. I examine the canvas in Amsterdam’s Van Gogh Museum, and it reveals a jungle of color. Blacks and browns are not what they appear. Like every color in the painting, they are made by combinations of primary colors—red, yellow, and blue. Reds and greens fight. Even the shadows have colors, all of which carry energy, convey emotion, and capture what is beyond the visible.

How Vincent’s vision emerged remains a mystery. His letters provide intimate access to the creative process—more than is possible with any other artist—yet leave us at a dead end when we seek the source of genius. In van Gogh’s case it was a combination of inherited skill, willingness to challenge accepted truths, and an intuitive grasp of color relationships. Obsessiveness was also essential. Unencumbered by job or family, he devoted every moment to developing his skills.

Sensing what color made possible, Vincent began to ask Theo about Impressionism. He knew that a movement existed but remained unaware of Impressionism’s bright colors, happy scenes, dabs of paint, and impression of spontaneity—even though the first major Impressionist exhibition had been in Paris ten years earlier. *Here in Holland it is rather difficult to find out what Impressionism really means.* Vincent had been studying Japanese woodcut prints, the same type the Impressionists studied, yet knew little about developments in nearby Paris.

Theo, who apparently found Vincent’s intensity difficult, tried to persuade him not to come to Paris. But in March 1886, after 18 months of asking about Impressionism, Vincent sent a note to Theo’s office. It announced his arrival in Paris. *Do not be cross with me for having come all at once like this.* Vincent moves in with Theo, and the letters stop.

Few Impressionists had sold, yet Parisian artists continued to devise new techniques,

such as Georges Seurat’s pointillism—small dots or strokes of color that blend when seen from a distance. Vincent met these artists at studios and cafés, and many quickly recognized him as a genius. Only six years after that walk in the rain to Courrières, Vincent was at the heart of the avant-garde.

Vincent confined himself to a compact area within Montmartre, a hilltop section of northern Paris known for nightlife. I visit the apartment

he shared with Theo; the area where he first felt drawn to—and painted—sunflowers; and the cafés where he argued art.

In his pocket Vincent carried red and blue chalk, drawing on walls when describing his latest theories. To better understand color combinations, he studied balls of colored yarn, which he kept in a lacquer box. Purple and yellow. Pink and blue. Yellow and yellow. Orange and red. Instead of grays and browns, his work began to emphasize blue and red, then yellow and orange—which he added

to some works completed in the Netherlands.

Within months of arriving in Paris, van Gogh began to see like the van Gogh we know today. He was a failed preacher, using color to whisper his sermon: Go slow. Stop thinking. Look around. You’ll see something beautiful if you open yourself.

I want to go to van Gogh’s “Restaurant de la Sirène at Asnières.” No place, his painting suggests, could make you happier. The actual restaurant disappeared long ago. Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, author of *Van Gogh à Paris*, joins me to eat in a café that seems ordinary until I begin to listen to van Gogh. Blue table cloth. Thick floorboards. Ivy growing on stone wall. Plants in curved vases. Green. Yellow. Red. Orange. Sun shimmers on a red-tile roof.

We choose this quiet café because terrorists have been placing bombs in popular places. A newspaper headline reports massacre and rape in Bosnia. “How can van Gogh be important when such things are happening?” I say. Welsh-Ovcharov’s response—“Such things make van

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



SELF-PORTRAIT, SPRING 1887



THE POSTMAN ROULIN, JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1889

distinguish as many as ten million different colors and tones; an infinite number of combinations is possible. Perhaps someone armed with powerful computers will one day decipher van Gogh's color concoctions. They are instantly accessible yet maddeningly complex.

VINCENT OFTEN could not eat or sleep. *To attain the high yellow note that I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well keyed up.*

After working all night on a self-portrait, he was unhappy with it and traded it for five Japanese prints. The Arles shop owner sold it to a cleric, and its history disappears—until 1946, when Reeves Lewenthal, a young American art dealer, got a flat tire on the outskirts of Paris. Lewenthal entered a bistro to call a mechanic. The bistro was dark and grimy with paintings on its walls. Lewenthal recognized one as a van Gogh.

Some art historians still believe this painting—"Study by Candlelight"—is genuine, but by the 1970s most regarded it as a fake. The persistence of such stories helps explain Vincent's popularity. Find a van Gogh and get rich quick. A new one turns up about every decade. So do forgeries. Annet Tellegen, one of the world's leading experts on van Gogh, says that about one in fifteen currently accepted van Goghs—including some of the most famous—are forgeries. Because owners have invested so much money and prestige, they have little interest in learning the truth.

A COMBINATION of fake and real greets me as I enter the Place du Forum, just north of the open square that was a center of Arlesian life under Roman rule—from the first century B.C. through the fifth A.D. There it is! The subject of his "Café Terrace at Night." Restored in 1980, its tables have silk sunflowers. It is called the Café van Gogh. Next door is Snack Bar Le Tambourin, the name of Vincent's favorite café in Paris. A cup of coffee costs two dollars.

My hotel room overlooks the terrace café.

Sounds drift in as I continue Vincent's letters. I am angry at Theo, whose records show that he sold one of Vincent's self-portraits to a buyer in London. Theo never told Vincent, and no one knows how much the buyer paid.

At 1:30 a.m. I go looking for what Vincent portrayed in "The Night Café," completed several blocks away near the railroad station. In contrast to the happy glow of "Café Terrace at Night," it uses the conflict between colors

to capture lonely people awake in the middle of the night. *I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.*

The only open café I find is a McDonald's with plastic sunflowers and a tile replica of van Gogh's "The Night Café."

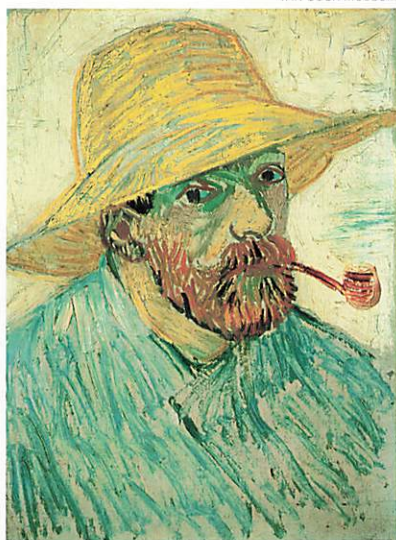
After I return to my room, Theo suddenly walks onstage. Vincent—for unknown reasons—saved 36 of his letters, beginning in Arles. They convey a deep sensitivity I had not expected: "The sympathy an artist feels for

certain lines and for certain colors will cause his soul to be reflected in them." "It is such a pleasure for me to look at your pictures. They make the rooms so gay, and there is such an intensity of truth." "You have repaid me many times over, by your work as well as by your friendship, which is of greater value than all the money I shall ever possess."

Theo's words could not touch Vincent's loneliness. *Often whole days pass without my speaking to anyone.* "We regarded him as crazy," Jeanne Calment tells me. "He lit candles in the brim of his hat as he painted outside at night. People called him *fada*, touched by fairies."

Calment, born in 1875, and the world's oldest person whose birth is documented, smiles and thrusts out her breasts. This, she says, is how she flirted with Vincent when she was 14. He had come into her cousin's store. "I was very pretty, but he wanted only to discuss painting," she says—still annoyed.

How I'd like to settle down and have a home!



SELF-PORTRAIT WITH STRAW HAT, 1887